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ABSTRACT

The new General Educational Development test demands that students read critically. Teaching critical reading presents a twofold challenge to teachers. First, they must help students expand their knowledge in content areas. They must also teach students the skills involved in reading critically. Because the skills entailed in critical reading are not skills that a teacher can demonstrate, the method of providing learning activities once reading has been completed is not appropriate. One effective method of teaching critical reading is that developed by Harold Herber. Supported by more than 20 years of research, the method emphasizes preparation for and guidance during reading rather than postreading activities. During the preparation stage, the teacher prepares students to receive new information. This serves to motivate students and provide them with a frame of reference into which to receive ideas. Then, during guided reading, students learn to use the processes necessary to obtain meaning from what they read by participating in a simulation of the reading process. Students use a teacher-prepared reading guide that consists of literal and critical statements for students to verify or dispute as they read. Students work in groups of three to five, and teachers check the students' work. Unlike traditional methods of reading instruction in which most discussion takes place after the material has been read, here the discussion takes place before reading and before they have encountered difficulty in comprehending. (MN)

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TECHNIQUES

Teaching critical reading in the content areas

By Mirga Valaitis

The new GED test demands that students read critically. That is, students must understand a passage well enough to be able to interpret, apply, analyze, and evaluate the information in it. Teaching critical reading presents a two-fold challenge to the teacher. One important challenge is that the teacher must help students expand their knowledge in the content areas. Readers understand what they read by integrating printed information with knowledge they already possess; yet, students whose backgrounds in science and social studies are very limited have weak frames of reference into which to fit new ideas. Consequently, they understand little of what they read. The most to be expected is that they recall facts. The limited technical vocabulary of many students is also a contributor to the difficulties they encounter.

In addition, the teacher must teach students the skills involved in reading critically. These skills are not the kind that the teacher can demonstrate for students to copy. Instead, a different technique is necessary.

It is possible to help students learn to read critically in the content areas by using a method modeled on one advanced by Dr. Harold Herber, as outlined in his *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas* (1979). Dr. Herber's method has been supported by 20 years of research. It differs from many conventional methods in its emphasis on preparation for and guidance during reading, rather than on activities once reading has been completed. As adapted here, the method has two major components: preparation and guidance.

Preparation

During preparation, the teacher prepares students to receive new information. Effective preparation serves to motivate students, as well as to provide them with a frame of reference into which to receive ideas.

1. A general discussion about the topic of the chosen passage can help students relate new information to their personal knowledge.

2. After the discussion, a review of facts that students have previously learned, as they relate to the topic, is beneficial. The review strengthens the frames of reference students have already begun building.

3. The teacher then presents necessary vocabulary, including, but not limited to, that which is technical.

4. A lesson on a specific comprehension skill, such as understanding cause and effect, chronological order, or comparison and contrast, may be necessary.

5. Finally, a teacher directs the students to look for specific information in the passage. With the teacher's direction, students learn to focus on what is most important in a passage.

Guidance

Integral to this method is guidance during reading. During guided reading, students learn to use the processes necessary for them to obtain meaning from what they read. They learn by participating in a simulation of the reading process.

Guidance requires that the teacher prepares a reading guide. Most simply, a reading guide consists of two sets of statements for the students to verify or dispute. The statements in the first, or literal, set express essential information from the text. The statements in the second, or critical, set are interpretations, applications, analyses, and evaluations of the information.

Examples of both types of statements follow the paragraph below and relate the information presented in it.

Did you know that the sun is a star much like the stars you see twinkling in the night sky? The sun looks so much bigger and brighter because it is so much closer to the earth. The sun is 93 million miles from Earth. The next closet star is 21 trillion miles away (Contemporary, 1985).

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Literal

1. The sun is a star.
2. The sun looks brighter than other stars because it is bigger than they are.

Critical

1. We depend on the sun more than on any other star. (interpretation)
2. Things are not always as they appear. (application)
3. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. You can conclude that light from the sun reaches Earth in less than a second. (application)
4. The distances, 93 million miles and 21 trillion miles, are probably approximate rather than exact. (evaluation)
5. There is no star 5 billion miles away from Earth. (analysis)

Students receive copies of the guide and divide into groups of three to five. They mark the statements on the guide which the members of their group agree are true. As the students work, a simulation of the reading process occurs. Rarely does a competent reader read an expository passage from beginning to end, only once, as students are often directed to do. It may simply be necessary to skim a passage to verify literal statements. Parts that require interpretation must be reread several times. Facts from different parts of a passage may be related and should be evaluated together. Since each group is required to agree on answers, students vocalize their thought processes as well as share necessary background knowledge.

A teacher's role at this time is to check each group's work. If a group reacts to a statement differently than the teacher has anticipated, a group member explains the group's thinking process. If necessary, the teacher then points out any faulty reasoning. Once the groups are finished marking the guides, it is unnecessary to go over the answers again. Instead, the teacher can take time to point out especially effective examples of reasoning observed.

Other methods of teaching critical reading may seem very similar and as effective. In fact, this method differs significantly from others.

Discussion takes place **before** students read. The teacher anticipates what assistance students will need in order to understand a passage and provides it so that reading is a productive activity. In classes where other methods are used, most discussion occurs **after** students have read and **after** they have had difficulty comprehending.

Students mark their answers as they read rather than **after** they have finished reading. The exercise becomes a simulation of the reading process. It is part of the learning experience rather than a test of students' critical reading abilities.

Students work in small groups. Those who do not understand the reason for an answer are more likely to ask for explanations, even repeated ones, in a small group of peers rather than in front of a class. In addition, explanations provided by peers can be more effective than those a teacher gives.

Teachers prepare reading guides rather than rely on the questions provided at the end of passages in commercial texts. They can be sure that necessary critical reading skills are addressed.

When teachers use the methods described, students learn factual information two ways: during preparation and while reading the passage for which they prepared. Reading guides walk the students through simulated reading experiences. Students develop behavioral patterns which they can use when reading independently. In addition, students become active participants in the learning process. They relate what they learn to their individual experiences. Their contributions benefit others. Students find that science and social studies are comprehensible and relevant subjects. **AAACE**

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See steps for teaching critical reading on page 30.

Related to Techniques on pages 28-29

TEACHING CRITICAL READING		
Teacher Challenges	Preparation Phase	Guidance
1. Help students expand knowledge in the content areas	1. General discussion	Enhancement of skills through use of reading guide as an instructional tool with two skill sets: 1. LITERAL Recognition of facts, informational material 2. CRITICAL a) interpretation b) applications c) analyses d) evaluation of the information Participation in group endeavors Involved participation and vocalization of statements Justification of statements
	2. Review to strengthen frame of reference	
	3. Introduction to necessary vocabulary	
	4. Instruction on a targeted skill	
	5. Directed search for specific information	
2. Help students acquire skills in reading critically		